



COMMENTS of MARK BARDEN, MANAGING DIRECTOR House Select Committee on Mass Violence Prevention & Community Safety (Duty 4)

Sandy Hook Promise is a national nonprofit based in Newtown, Connecticut. Led by several family members whose loved ones were among the twenty children and six adults killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012, the organization's mission is to end school shootings and create a culture change that *prevents violence*.

Chairman Darby and members of the committee, my name is Mark Barden and I serve as one of two Managing Directors at Sandy Hook Promise. I am also father to James, Natalie, and my youngest, Daniel. My sweet little Daniel was seven years old the last time I held his hand. Seven years old the day a violent man with a high-powered rifle and a plan to kill, entered his school. My sweet little Daniel was only seven years old when he was murdered in his first-grade classroom.

In the long shadow of this life-altering loss, I helped form Sandy Hook Promise where we strive to build a culture of engaged youth and adults committed to identifying, intervening, and getting help for those who may be at risk of hurting themselves or others. We are confident that if we equip teachers and students with the skills they need to recognize the overt signs and signals of an at-risk individual, we can facilitate a future where children are free from all forms of violence, including gun violence, in the three places they spend most of their time: *school, community, and home*.

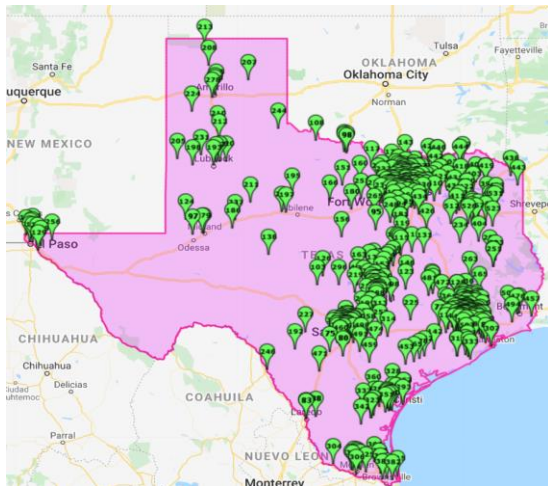
Recommendation 1: *Increase students' safety in school through violence-prevention programs and ensure enough licensed mental health professionals are available to them*

Research has proven Sandy Hook Promise's *Know the Signs* programs – *Say Something* and *Start With Hello* - effectively teach youth and adults how to identify at-risk behaviors and how to intervene to get help. Each program offers 30-40 minutes of student training that can be delivered in-person (such as during an assembly or during one standard class period) or digitally. We are also equipped to provide live distance-training. Additionally, our programs align with Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies including relationship skills, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and self-awareness. Lastly, we provide our programs at no cost to schools.

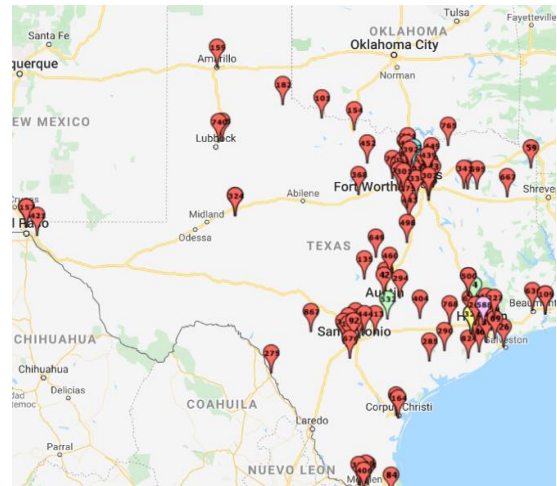
- ***Say Something*** teaches students the warning signs of violence and why it is important to reach out to a trusted adult when they hear or see something indicating someone is at risk of hurting themselves or others.
- ***Start with Hello*** equips students to help combat social isolation in their schools and address bullying and other contributing factors, as socially isolated youth can engage in behavior that proves harmful to self or others.

Sandy Hook Promise also partners with the Texas School Safety Center. This partnership will bring a train-the-trainer model in *Say Something* and *Start with Hello* to key school personnel in each of the regions served by Texas' 20 Education Service Centers. We also host an annual, national Call to Action (CTA) week for each program. During these weeks, schools can bring the target program to students through digital materials or school-wide assemblies. In 2019 for instance, in the last week of February, Texans across 44 counties signed up to participate in the *Say Something* CTA alone, **reaching more than 63,000 students and upwards of 6,000 adults.**

KNOW THE SIGNS FOOTPRINT (both programs)



2019 CTA: SAY SOMETHING



Sandy Hook Promise programs can also be permanently integrated into school culture, and their teachings sustained, through SAVE Promise Clubs. Texas has 131 SAVE Promise Clubs and of which 26 were formed during the 2019-2020 academic year.¹ Additionally, some Texas districts have coupled *Say Something* with an anonymous reporting app in order to ensure students have options for reaching out to a trusted adult when they learn someone is at risk of harming themselves or others. As of 2020, seven Texas districts were using the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System:

¹ See: National SAVE Promise club page for [list of Texas schools](#).

Port Aransas ISD, El Campo ISD, Houston ISD, Lake Dallas ISD, Alvarado ISD, Whitehouse ISD, and Burnet Consolidated Schools.

Mental health professionals

Licensed mental health professionals belong in the nation's K-12 schools alongside school counselors. Both are necessary because there is not a universal definition for "school counselor" and the lack of uniformity means individuals bearing this title can have vastly different qualifications. According to the American School Counselor Association, counselors help foster a positive school environment and help guide and promote students' academic achievement, career choices, and social emotional success. Licensed mental health professionals, such as school psychologists and social workers, are specially trained to help students successfully navigate their mental health needs.

When discussing the need for mental health professionals, however, it is important to note that "mental health" should not be conflated with mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association offers a useful frame to help clarify this distinction. They note, *"mental health is the foundation for emotions, thinking, communication, learning, resilience, and self-esteem...[it] is also key to relationships, personal and emotional well-being and contributing to community or society."* Of mental illness, they say it *"refers collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders – health conditions involving significant changes in thinking, emotion, and/or behavior [plus] distress and/or problems functioning in social work or family activities."*² It follows then, that schools should be equipped to respond to the needs of students living with mental illness but also, to *all students'* general mental health needs.

A. Workforce needs

Sandy Hook Promise acknowledges there are a variety of licensed mental health professionals. The Texas Department of State Health Services, Professional Licensing and Certification Unit, has identified two types that are of particular relevance to students: Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC) and Social Workers.³ The agency describes LPCs as providing "professional therapeutic services...that involve the application of mental health, psychotherapeutic, and human development principles to facilitate adjustment and development throughout life."⁴ These services often include individual counseling, chemical dependency counseling, education counseling, psychotherapy, and diagnostic assessment, among others.⁵ A licensed Social Worker can also provide mental wellness support to students. According to the Texas Education Agency,

² American Psychiatric Association, *Licensed Mental Health Professionals in Texas – A fact sheet for consumers* (<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>). Last visited on August 10, 2020.

³ See: Texas Department of State Health Services ([file:///C:/Users/madru/Downloads/lmh_fact%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/madru/Downloads/lmh_fact%20(2).pdf)). Last visited on August 10, 2020.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

social workers provide services aimed at “restoring or enhancing social, psychosocial, or biopsychosocial functioning.”

According to TEA data, during the 2018-2019 school year there were 787 Social Workers and 1,959 psychologists in Texas’ schools; about 1 Social Worker for every 6,860 students and 1 psychologist for every 2,757.⁶ This imbalance is worrisome on its face but even more troubling when one considers the state of students’ mental wellness. For example, according to the 2017 Texas Youth Risk Behavior Survey, high school students in Texas have a high rate of attempted suicide; 12.3% vs 7.4% for their peers in the rest of nation.⁷ The survey also revealed that more than 1 in 7 female high school students and 1 in 16 male high school students, had experienced sexual violence in the prior 12 months.⁸

The numbers here suggest a framework for the related workforce need. They call out with urgency for Texas to move toward the ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. The Association recommends 1 counselor for every 250 students. Sandy Hook Promise believes this ratio is a good rule of thumb as it relates to the availability of licensed mental health professionals as well. Yet, this ratio should not be the endpoint. That is, while this ratio is a vast improvement, it is likely not reflective of a healthy balance for both the licensed mental health professional and the students who may need their help.

B. Policy solutions

Sandy Hook Promise recommends the introduction and passage of comprehensive legislation that mandates *evidence-informed* or *evidence-based* violence prevention training for all Texas students. These trainings should cover the following three areas: suicide prevention, general violence-prevention, and social inclusion. Additionally, by ensuring all students receive training, Texas can avoid causing inadvertent disparities as it relates to which students are given access to the trainings. Additionally, this effort should be paired with a parallel initiative to legislate a long-term plan to onboard more licensed mental health professionals. This will ensure students have a trusted adult they can turn to when they need help but also, when they learn that someone else needs help.

This *prevention* approach also means there will be less need for some of the school safety responses that ballooned after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, including live active shooter drills. At times announced and at times not, live active shooter drills can incorporate law

⁶ Texas Education Agency, 2018-2019 Staff Salaries and FTE counts (https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/enroll_2018-19.pdf). Last visited on August 10, 2020.

⁷ Texas Department of State Health Services, YRBS Data Brief, Suicidal Behavior (<https://dshs.texas.gov/chs/yrbs/pages/YRBS-Data-Briefs/>). Last visited on August 10, 2020.

⁸ Texas Department of State Health Services, YRBS Data Brief, Dating Violence (<https://dshs.texas.gov/chs/yrbs/pages/YRBS-Data-Briefs/>). Last visited on August 10, 2020.

enforcement - in full tactical gear with guns drawn - moving through school buildings. Some live active shooter drills have gone so far as to incorporate rubber bullets, fake blood, strewn bodies mimicking death or injury, and the jiggling of doorknobs to mimic efforts at forced entry. In some states, the liability costs associated with these approaches has skyrocketed; one Iowa insurance company paid out over a quarter of a million dollars in claims related to injuries from active shooter trainings in under two years.⁹ Sandy Hook Promise champions evidence-based approaches that increase student safety, however, there is no evidence demonstrating live active shooter drills save lives.

Recommendation 2: Increase student safety in community by closing the stranger-to-stranger loophole and ensuring availability of licensed mental health professionals

Ensuring the safety of students once they leave the school environment is also critical. Because one of the most salient dangers facing students in community is gun violence, requiring private sellers of firearms to use the public safety tools available to them — such as background checks — is directly aligned with the promotion of responsible gun ownership. Specifically, closing the loophole permitting private gun sales between absolute strangers without a background check ever taking place, eliminates one avenue available to those most apt to misuse the Second Amendment to harm children. It is also an urgent need because on any given summer day in Texas, more than 2,000 guns are available for sale or trade between strangers via an online marketplace.¹⁰

A. Workforce needs

Like schools, communities also find themselves faced with a shortage of licensed mental health professionals. Texas has a system in place for youth with mental illness. The residential treatment services available through the Texas Health and Human Services Commission and the Texas Department of Family Protective Services is one example.¹¹ However, there is not a similar system in place for students who, while not suffering from mental illness, may nevertheless be in need of mental health support to process the direct and indirect impact of gun violence in their community. Through this lens, while Sandy Hook Promise firmly believes closing the stranger-to-stranger loophole will help increase students' safety in their communities, we also believe students deserve to *feel* safe in their communities. Ready access to licensed mental health professionals is one way to ensure that outcome.

B. Policy recommendations

⁹ See, e.g.: Michael Dorn, "Active Shooter" Response Training Injury Costs Rapidly Adding Up, Safe Havens International, Sept. 3, 2014, <https://safehavensinternational.com/active-shooter-response-training-injury-costs-rapidly-adding/>.

¹⁰ See: [Armslist.com](https://armslist.com) (last visited on August 10, 2020).

¹¹ See: Texas Health and Human Services, News Release: *State funding more residential treatment centers* (<https://hhs.texas.gov/about-hhs/communications-events/news/2020/01/more-texas-children-youth-receive-mental-health-services-remain-families>). Last visited on August 10, 2020.

An immediate step toward increasing community safety, especially that of students, is to pass legislation requiring a completed background check on gun sales between strangers. Simultaneously, however, Texas should put resources in place to support students' mental health needs in the event they experience gun violence in their community. Legislation incentivizing entry into the mental health profession is one option, especially if it forms partnerships between the State and universities/colleges responsible for graduating qualified candidates.

Recommendation 3: Increase student safety in the home through Crisis Aversion and Rights Retention Orders and ensure availability of licensed mental health professionals for gun owners in crisis

Students' daily activities often begin and end in their homes. Not all homes are safe places, at all times, however. In turn, this fact can precipitate acts of self-harm or violence against others. The suicide rate among Texans ages 15 – 24 exceeds the national average.¹² Texans in this age group have a suicide rate of 15.1 per 100,000 population while the national average hovers at 14.4.¹³ Alarming, the suicide rate among White Texans (across all ages) is 15.4 per 100,000 people, compared to 7.3 for Black and Hispanic Texans. Yet, if a family is concerned their loved one is at risk of harming themselves or others, but no crime has been committed, there is little they can do to protect that loved one or the public. Crisis Aversion and Rights Retention Orders (CARR) can help. Similar to Extreme Risk Protection Orders, they are designed to facilitate action before a firearm is misused (and the right to bear arms permanently lost). Plus, in the shadow of a school shooting, students will often talk about the signs and signals they observed; sign and signals which suggested a tragedy was looming. CARR can facilitate timely intervention when those signs become evident and provided reasonable access to licensed mental health professionals, the person in crisis can receive the help they need and deserve.

A. Policy Recommendations

An immediate step toward increasing students' safety in their home, is passage of CARR legislation. However, because CARR Orders are all about people in crisis, in line with our policy suggestions under Recommendation 2, legislation designed to increase the availability of licensed mental health professionals should also be introduced.

Summary

By putting in place proven violence-prevention programs and policy solutions addressing the “human side” of gun violence – policies that prevent individuals from ever getting to the point of picking up a firearm to hurt themselves or others – public safety increases, and past tragedies become a bridge for transformation. When this proven approach is combined with parallel efforts to increase the

¹² See, e.g.: United Health Foundation, America's Health Rankings, Suicide rates in Texas (2019) (https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/Suicide/population/suicide_15-24/state/TX). Last visited on August 10, 2020.

¹³ Id.

availability of licensed mental health professionals, a permanent shift toward safety and wellness is possible. Sandy Hook Promise is committed to facilitating this outcome for Texas' students in their schools, communities, and homes.